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The Secret Agent

WASHINGTON Who is this fellow that Ronald Reagan trusts more than his Cabinet secretaries? History will want to know what sort of man was able to persuade his President to turn away from a lifetime of straight dealing.

Marine Lieut. Col. Robert McFarlane was an assistant to Senator John Tower at Armed Services in the Carter years, and came to the attention of Reagan men with a report castigating the Carter Administration for its military ineptitude in trying to free hostages at "Desert One" in Iran.

He deserved a political payoff for that helpful judgment, but Richard Allen did not want him on the National Security Council staff. Al Haig welcomed him at State, however, where the tight-lipped McFarlane soon cultivated William Clark, President Reagan's Haig-watcher at State, and through him, Michael Deaver.

When Mr. Allen came under fire at the N.S.C., Mr. Deaver urged the President to dump him and bring in Mr. Clark and Mr. McFarlane; when the hapless Judge Clark wore out, Mr. Deaver — increasingly interested in foreign affairs appointments — helped slot his friend "Bud" into the sensitive spot at the N.S.C.

The McFarlane sojourn at the White House was disappointing. He was an apparatchik with a geopolitical vocabulary, pontificating at Roosevelt Room briefings of pundits who rolled their eyes at his pretensions. When all the power flowed to George Shultz at State, the frustrated Mr. McFarlane quit.

On his departure, I characterized him — along with his successor, a naval officer named Poindexter who shined at note-taking — as "Option Three" men, who tended to split the differences between State and Defense and C.I.A. in advising the President. They were more brokers than players, I thought at the time, and had not the *Weltanschauung* of a Kissinger or Brzezinski.

That stung. Colonel McFarlane may appear to be a cool and level-headed man, and he works hard at that appearance on television by never taking issue, praising questioners for good questions, and calling all interviewers by their first names. Underneath, this buttoned-up fellow seethes with envy at the respect given Dr. Kissinger, and tastes the bile of thwarted ambition.

In Colonel McFarlane's mind, N.S.C. predecessors suffered from Spenglerian pessimism or lacked strategic reach. It was the belittled "Bud" — despite the reluctance of touted Pentagon strategists — who saw how high-tech-nology leverage could "stress" the

Soviet economy and force the Russians to retrench, and who sold Mr. Reagan on "Star Wars."

He did grant Henry the brilliance of the secret China opening. And that was how the rejected McFarlane saw he could gain the credit given conceptualizers: what he needed to break out of the apparatchik mold was a secret mission to the forbidden city of the 80's, Teheran.

When the feeler for hostage ransom came from Hojatolislam Rafsanjani, who saw a way to match his country's immediate need for arms with its periodic need to humiliate U.S. Presidents, Colonel McFarlane was ready. He twanged Mr. Reagan's hostage heartstrings and, always low key, persuaded him to make the worst mistake of his Presidency: to authorize a down payment of 250,000 pounds of arms to es-

Buttoned up but seething

tablish the McFarlane bona fides in dickering for hostage releases.

When the Iranians, arms in hand, made the ransom public, the public revulsion began to set in. It turns out the President had underestimated the downside risk in giving Iran the chance to show him up as liar, softy and dupe.

The rest of the story will unravel along with the Reagan prestige. The Saudis must have been mightily impressed by Iran's ability this summer to swing the U.S. around, and suddenly dumped Sheik Yamani and changed their oil price policy to appease the winners. OPEC price hikes would not only benefit Iran, but help most the Soviet Union (largest oil seller) and drive up U.S. prices. The damage done by Colonel McFarlane's lust for strategic stardom is not limited to the loss of respect for America's word.

Nor should investigators forget that Saudi Arabia is still Michael Deaver's largest and most loyal client. Colonel McFarlane told me last spring he could not remember 1985 conversations held with the new lobbyist and foreign agent; his memory may have improved under oath.

Perhaps a grand jury providing lifetime employment for a special prosecutor can discover the details of a back channel between the U.S., the Saudis and Iran that the tarnished Mr. Reagan wants so desperately to hide. The tightly controlled colonel has much more to tell. □